

## The Only Child of the Universe by amutemockingjay

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**Genre:** Canon Divergence, Dad!Hopper, Drabbles, F/M, Fluff, Growing Up, Slice of Life, little snapshots of Eleven's life, maybe small arcs, maybe some angst idk, oneshots

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**Summary:**

"I was the only child of the universe//till I found you"

Drabbles and oneshots, little bits and pieces of Eleven's life, maybe a touch of angst here and there but I really live for fluff between her and Mike so I make no apologies.

# 1. Dreams

## Author's Note:

I've basically been living under a rock and not writing much because I've been in eating disorder treatment for seven months, but when I came out of residential for the second time this Thanksgiving, I got hooked on Stranger Things, so fanfiction had to happen. A bit rusty on account of the lack of writing for so long, but glad to be back in the game. I'm such a sucker for the relationship between Eleven and Mike (she's my very favorite) so I wanted to write on that, mostly. Next one up will feature dad!Hopper because I'm a sucker for that too.

When she falls asleep, huddled in her blankets in the basement, she dreams of him. Usually her dreams are austere, black and white, a silent maze that made her chest constrict and her limbs lock, frozen in place. This dream, though, is different.

There's sunshine. Sunshine poking between leaves and branches, patterns of diamonds on the forest floor. The sweet, fresh scent of pine hits her and her hands, sticky with the sap of the tree, clings to the rough bark of a branch. She realizes that she's high up in this tree, swinging her legs, gripping the underside of the branch so she doesn't fall. He's next to her, sitting hip to hip, and wraps his arm around her, pulling her closer.

"Hey," he says, softly, and she turns to look at him.

She doesn't know what she wants, not really, only that the tips of her toes are tingling, her palms a little slick against the bark. Only that there's a longing, a longing that she can't name or recognize. Something bigger than the words that she knows.

He leans in, and she thinks this is when the world is supposed to slow down, that every second will be hours, every sense heightened. Instead, everything moves far too quickly--his lips are on hers in an instant. She doesn't know how to kiss; she stiffens up, almost jumps

back in surprise at the touch. There's a part of her, though, that lights up, a warmth that settles in the center of her ribs and when they break the kiss, she realizes she wants another.

"El!"

She blinks, and the forest fades away. Somebody is shaking her arm, she can feel it, and she reluctantly opens her eyes. Mike is standing outside of her bed, and she has the inexplicable urge to bury her head in her pillow. Instead, she sits up.

"I'm going to school. I'll be back later with Lucas and Dustin." He holds out two Eggos. "Breakfast. You going to be okay?"

She nods. "Okay."

She watches him leave, and even though she knows its not real, she can still feel pressure of his lips on hers.

## 2. Womanhood?

### Summary for the Chapter:

She's used to blood. But not this.

### Notes for the Chapter:

So, one of the things I admittedly wondered over the course of watching Stranger Things was, "What is this poor girl going to do when she gets her period?" This was my answer to that question, ft. Dad!Hopper with a side of JHopper because how can I not? Merry Christmas to those who celebrate (I wanted to do a Chanukah oneshot because my headcanon is Max is Jewish like me but I ran out of time)! Also come talk to me about Stranger Things on Tumblr @piecesofkessa

She's used to blood. Her nosebleeds, the injuries and death she's seen since her escape from the lab, what seems like a lifetime ago but it's only been a year and a half. Yet, she's not used to this blood.

Waking up with the sheets, streaked with it, her inner thighs coated in the stuff. No, this isn't right. She balls up the ruined pajamas and gets dressed, like she's supposed to. Hopper likes his morning routine with her. She tries to wipe away the blood that's still running down her legs but it's futile, it doesn't stop. She furrows her brows, puzzled. Nothing hurts, so why is this happening? She emerges from her room, moving with caution.

"Hop?"

He grunts some indistinct reply. He's not one for conversation without coffee.

"Blood," she says, and he snaps to attention.

"Blood? What blood? What's wrong, kid? What hurts?"

"Nothing hurts. Just blood."

“Okay,” he says, slowly. “But where?”

She points to her thighs, where there’s a stain already forming on her jeans. “On the bed. And my pajamas.”

Hop puts down his coffee cup. “Son of a bitch. Okay. Uh. Just sit. Wait, don’t sit, you’ll get blood everywhere. Stand. Yeah, stand, hold on, and I’ll make a phone call.”

He lights a cigarette, and she nods.

He picks the phone up. “Joyce? Yeah, I know it’s short notice, but can you come over? Have Jonathan take Will to school? No, everything’s fine, no emergency. It’s just El. She, uh, got her period and no--stop laughing at me, damn it. Look, I just need your help. Right. Got it.” He hangs up, and stubs out his cigarette,

He goes into the bathroom and grabs a towel, placing it on the couch. “Here, sit.”

She does.

“Joyce is coming over.”

“Why?”

“To explain everything. And help you with the bleeding.”

El furrows her brows in confusion. “You can’t help me?” She might not always agree with Hop, but she trusts him to know how to solve things.

He hesitates. “It’s....better with Joyce. It’s, uh, a woman thing.”

“Woman thing?” El looks down at her stained thighs. She hadn’t counted on this. Not now. Maybe not ever.

He runs a hand through his hair. “Just part of growing up, kid. Trust me, she’ll be able to explain everything.”

There’s a knock at the door, the secret knock, and Hop strides across the room to answer it. Joyce is there, with a paper bag, dark shadows

under her eyes. She shoots Hopper a look that El can't decipher the meaning behind.

"Hey, honey." She greets El with an overly sympathetic tone that seems to have no logic to it. "Do you have a fresh change of clothes? We'll go into the bathroom and take care of this, okay?"

El retreats into her room and runs her hands through her limited set of clothes. Her jeans are already ruined, and she doesn't want to ruin her overalls, too. But Joyce would help her. Joyce would stop the bleeding, whatever this woman thing is. She picks up the overalls, a flannel shirt, and a clean pair of underwear.

In the bathroom, Joyce starts running a bath. She motions for El to undress and get in the tub, and she does. The warm water soothes the ache that has begun in her lower belly.

"Why the blood?" She asks Joyce.

"It means you're becoming a woman."

El furrows her brows in confusion. The second time this has come up, with no further explanation. What, precisely, did this mean? She struggles to formulate her thoughts.

"A woman?" The word is loaded, and sits heavily on her tongue.

Joyce goes on to explain that her body is growing and changing, and as she goes from being a girl to a woman, there will be a lot of changes. That her body is preparing for when she will have children someday, and she will continue to bleed once a month because of this.

El draws her knees to her chest and listens, wide-eyed. She doesn't really know what to make of all of this--she's still learning how to be a person, without the addition of womanhood, whatever that meant. The bathwater is getting cold, and Joyce holds out a towel for her. She dries off, and Joyce pulls a cardboard box out of the bag.

"This'll keep you from ruining your clothes." She shows El how to attach the pad to the inside of her underwear. "And we'll soak your clothes and bedsheets in cold water and salt to get the blood out."

El gets dressed, and frowns. She doesn't like the feeling of the pad in her underwear, or that she feels like she's constantly dripping. She emerges from the bathroom, Joyce behind her. Hop has laid out two Eggos extravaganzas on the small kitchen table. He doesn't quite meet her eyes.

"Thanks," he says to Joyce, nodding his head in El's direction. "We have coffee, if you'd like some."

Something passes between them, an energy El can read but can't place. It reminds her of the energy between her and Mike. Spots of color appear on Joyce's cheeks. "Thanks, Jim, but I better get back to Will."

"All right." Hopper hesitates by the door. "I guess I'll see you later, then."

She gives him a small smile. "Of course." She's gone without another word, and Hop stares after her with a look El knows all too well, and a word to go with it--longing.

Eventually, he sits down at the table across from her, as she digs into her Eggos. She's ravenous, and pays little attention to anything other than the sweetness. Finally, she pushes away her empty plate and looks up at him.

"I'm a woman now?" More of a question than a statement.

For the first time that morning, he smiles. He reaches over and ruffles her hair. "Yeah, kid. Yeah, you are."

### 3. Drunk

#### Summary for the Chapter:

She got curious.

#### Notes for the Chapter:

So this was originally inspired by a drunken phone call I made to my boyfriend about how much I loved him (which he thought was cute). Then, somehow, angst crept in, more than I let in for this particular pairing. I hope y'all don't think this is too OOC, and I might write Hop's reaction to all of this in the next chapter, maybe, because I just love writing him and El.

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She got curious. Left home alone all day, her homework, workbooks, and soap operas, she felt the loneliness ache in her muscles and settle in her bones for a long stay. And so, she found herself curious.

Hop had a hidden stash of bottles under the sink, maybe for those nights he stayed over, those nights she'd tiptoe out of her room and find him on the couch, tumbler of amber liquid in his hand or sometimes a beer, staring out into the expanse of woods that surrounded the cabin. She often wondered what he was thinking about--or trying to forget--in those moments, with the distance in his eyes that she could understand more than she could say. She wondered if the harsh-smelling liquid could help her forget the memories that clawed in her head, begging to be let out.

She pulled a bottle out from its hiding place, and unscrewed the top. She wrinkled her nose at the smell--it was almost antiseptic, almost like a smell she didn't want to remember. She tilted the bottle back and took a sip, almost spitting it right back out again. How could Hop down this like it was water?



She was, however, nothing if not determined, and forced herself to swallow the second mouthful. It burned going down her throat, but the sensation settled in the pit of her stomach as warmth. She liked that. She liked it enough to brave a few more mouthfuls, plugging her nose against the bad taste. The warmth made her head swim, a pleasant hum that began to drown out the bad thoughts, those snippets that assaulted her whenever she closed her eyes.

The warmth made her think of Mike. The brief warmth of his lips, when he had kissed her for the first time. The quick, stolen kisses they got now, that always left her longing for something she couldn't name. The way he pulled her close and his body heat radiated off of him, keeping her warm on those cold winter nights he could visit, those few and far between moments that she held onto, treasured, replayed in her mind over and over again. Mike. She wanted Mike.

She stood up and the room tilted with her, so much so that she fell to her hands and knees. Floor. The floor was comfortable, and she was starting to get used to the taste of the drink. She crawled towards the Supercom the party had given her last year. It was technically out of range, but with her powers, she could make it reach them.

"Mike," she slurred into the device, her tongue heavy in her mouth.

"El? Are you okay?"

"I miss you," she mumbles. The drink has taken away her barrier, the one she kept so close to her heart, where she wanted to say a thousand things but said nothing instead. Mike had always understood that about her.

"Your voice sounds funny. Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm good." She grins. "The stuff didn't taste good, but I'm good, very good, everything is good."

"Stuff?" She can imagine his expression, the way he crinkled his brows together.

"Under the sink. Hop keeps drinks and they don't taste bad but make everything good."

“Oh, god, El, are you drunk?”

She giggles. “What is drunk?”

“Son of a bitch. Okay, I’ll be right over. Put the bottle back where it belongs.”

“But I like it...”

“El. Please.”

She shakes her head and pulls the bottle closer, not realizing that he can’t even see her.

“Whatever. I’ll be right over. Over and out.”

“Bye.”

She blinks. The world is blurring at the edges, but instead of bringing reassurance, it starts to frighten her. What if Mike didn’t come? What if she was found by someone else? What about the Bad Men? The Bad Men were gone, she told herself. They were gone....

She is curled in a ball, drawing circles on the wood floor. Time means nothing. She could be here minutes, hours, it didn’t matter. The circles were soothing. Her head was buzzing in the background, thoughts half-articulated before being abandoned. She tried to concentrate, tried to use her powers, but they were half-hearted attempts at best. Maybe the drink interfered, numbed her out. Maybe. Maybe it was everything she wanted and nothing she wanted at the same time.

There is a cold breeze as the door to the cabin opened. A figure stood in the doorway.

“Eleven?”

“Mike.” She sat up, and her stomach flipped over in a way she didn’t like. She didn’t feel so good. But seeing Mike made everything better.

“Are you on the floor?” Suddenly he is at her eye level; she can take in every one of his freckles. She reaches out and touches his nose

with one finger and grins.

“Jesus, you’re gone.” He glances at the bottle on the floor. “I’m going to get you into bed, okay? Can you stand up for me?”

She tries, and stumbles immediately. Mike has his arm around her in an instant, supporting her, guiding her to her bed.

“Bed’s so soft,” she says, sinking into the pillows. He places a trash can next to the bed, and crawls in beside her.

He’s stroking her hair, holding her hand.

“Why, El?”

She looks at him with wide eyes. “Because I’m alone,” she says simply, the words not making sense but somehow she knew they were true.

He squeezes her hand. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Stay with me. I’m not running anymore.”

“Always.”

“Mike, I...”

The words hang on her tongue, and she swallows them again. Even the drink won’t make her admit that she’s scared, that she’s holding back, that she fears losing him all over again. That maybe if she doesn’t say the words, it will keep them safe.

But he stays, holding her hand. Holding her hair back when she leans over the bed and throws up into the trash can.

She falls asleep with his hand in hers, that drunken sleep where light falls into shards and nothing makes sense. Vaguely, she hears Hop yelling about something, maybe her, she isn’t sure. She’s too tired and aching to care, her mouth sour and dry.

When she wakes in the morning, he’s gone. There’s a glass of water and two aspirin on the bedside table, and she rubs her eyes, her head

aching.

Maybe the whole thing was a strange dream. But as she got up, ready to face whatever hell Hop had in store with her, all she could think of was how close she had come to telling Mike the truth, that she loved him.

## 4. Hangover

### Summary for the Chapter:

The consequences of her actions.

### Notes for the Chapter:

I hinted at this in the last chapter but I'm playing with the idea that El's powers are not as strong when she's used substances of any kind, and then that unintentionally became my headcanon.

Light hurts. Everything hurts, really, and she's grateful for the aspirin, and the water. That had to be Mike. She had vague memories of Mike coming over, of his closeness. Of him holding her hand. The memories were blurred, in bits and pieces, intersecting with the pounding head and roiling stomach. If it wasn't entirely empty, she might have her head in that trash can again.

She swings her legs over the side of the bed. Outside her room, she can hear Hop moving around--his footsteps are painfully thunderous--and the smell of coffee. The smell turns her stomach even further and she claps a hand over her mouth, forcing herself to take deep breaths.

She has to face him. She knows that if she doesn't go out there now, she'll get shit for it at some point or another. She had heard yelling last night, though she didn't know if it was yelling about her thievery of his drink, or the fact that Mike had come over.

Hesitantly, she pushes open the door. Hop sits at their small kitchen table, drinking out of a mug. He wears an expression torn between fury and petty vengeance, and she doesn't like it one bit.

"Well, look who's up."

She doesn't respond. He puts down his mug. "You look like shit, kid."

She rubs at her eyes, hoping it will alleviate some of the pounding in her head. Naturally, it does not.

“You’re grounded, by the way,” he adds. “No TV for a month.”

“No!” She glowers at him, but she knows this dance.

They’ve done it before. The last time hadn’t ended well for either of them, but when she reaches for her power, she feels the flutter of a spark and it dies. Is she too tired, too drained, still affected by what she had done last night? She feels useless, unable to fight back, unable to find the words. How can she explain why she had gotten into the bottles, that she hadn’t fully understood what she had done, that she still didn’t know how the liquid had affected her the way it did. Drunk, Mike had said the word last night, but had not given an explanation of what the word meant.

Her legs are weak and rubbery, and she sinks down to the floor.

Hop glances down at her with skepticism. “There’s a chair right there, you know.”

“I’ll stay here,” she snaps back.

“Suit yourself,” he replies. “And stay the hell out of my liquor.”

“Fine.” She cradles her head in her hands, and hears the creak of floorboards as Hop moves around. It’s amplified for her, and she makes a small whimpering noise.

“You’re pretty hungover, aren’t you, kid?”

“What’s hungover?”

“Head pounding? Nauseous? Dead tired?”

She nods to all three.

“That’s a hangover. Happens when you drink too much.” There’s the sound of the tap, and she opens her eyes. Hop offers her a glass of water. She takes it, but stares at it, afraid that if she puts anything into her body she’ll be puking again.

“Drink it,” he says. “And get back into bed. No TV and a hangover is punishment enough.”

She takes the glass, puts it on her bedside table and crawls into bed, wrapping herself in the quilt. The door creaks, and she vaguely sees him in the doorway, hesitant.

He comes in, and tucks the covers around her. He lingers for a minute, clears his throat.

“You can talk to me, El. Use your words. I just thought you should know that.” He leaves, and she curls up in her blankets, exhausted, but strangely grateful.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

When I was drafting this in my head, I thought that Hop was gonna be really pissed and yell at her and be that sort of dad, because it's very much his nature to do so, but when I started writing I found that he had really softened towards her (and probably got it all out of his system by yelling at Mike the night before).

## 5. February Bouquets

### Summary for the Chapter:

"Happy Valentine's Day, El."

### Notes for the Chapter:

So, I've been meaning to write a V-Day drabble all week and only got to it right now, so thank you for your patience. These two are just too adorable. I know I briefly mentioned Max in this drabble, and I really want to write a reconciliation between El and her at some point.

February brought bitter cold to Hawkins, days that El didn't want to get out of bed, preferring the warmth of her quilts to the harsh air that somehow always found its way into the cabin. Sometimes, the Party would come over on a weekend afternoon, and they'd go sledding, or get into snowball fights. She came to love those moments--then, the cold was a welcome friend, bringing a flush to her cheeks as she ran through the deep, wet snow to tackle Dustin, or hit Max in the face with a snowball (she claimed unintentional but both girls knew better).

One Saturday morning, though, she heard the secret knock and was surprised. There had been no plans made; Hop always required visits to meticulously planned and supervised. Hop was at the kitchen table drinking his coffee, and El gave him a worried glance. Instead, she was met with a smile.

"Go on and answer it," he said.

She opened the door, and immediately she felt warmth travel from the center of her chest to the tips of her fingers. Mike stood on the sagging porch, a bouquet of flowers pressed to his chest.

"Mike!" She pulled him into his arms, taking in his scent, the feeling of his body against hers. He was getting taller, she had noticed. So much so that she almost had to stand on the tips of her toes to kiss



him.

The flush that spread across his cheeks made his freckles stand out more, and she was struck with the urge to kiss each one.

“Hey, El.” His breath was warm against her neck, and she shivered for reasons other than the cold.

She shot a quick glance towards the cabin. Hop was probably still drinking his coffee, hopefully not watching the teenagers over the top of his cup, like he often did.

Quickly, El pressed her lips to Mike’s, softly at first, but as he kissed her back, it grew in intensity, heat pulsing and knotting itself in her lower belly. She wanted more of him, more of this moment, more of this feeling she didn’t fully understand yet, but drove her. When he moved his lips from hers to her jaw, her neck, she gasped.

“Mike,” she murmured, his name coming out like a sigh--had she ever spoken his name like this before?

His hands were in her hair, and he drew her into another kiss and she swore part of her was floating, that she could stay this way forever, that nothing would--

“El!” It wasn’t Mike calling her name but Hop. “You better not be getting up to something I don’t like on that porch!”

Embarrassed, the two flew apart, and El reached for Mike’s hand, pulling him inside.

“You’re also bringing the cold in with you,” Hopper pointed out, putting down his mug.

El closed the door behind them, and the two teenagers settled on the couch, El leaning up against Mike, her head on his shoulder.

“Where’s everyone else?” El asked. “I didn’t think we were doing anything today.”

“They’re not,” Mike replied. “But I thought...I thought I’d come see you. Because, well...” He thrust the bouquet into her hands. “Happy

Valentine's Day, El."

She took the flowers; they were pink roses, with a sweet scent that quickly became her favorite. She loved flowers, when she had managed to see a few. They were something she had never had until she came out into the real world, and all parts of nature were a source of fascination to her.

But something confused her.

"What's Valentine's Day?"

"It's a holiday where you do nice things for those you lov--care about a lot." Mike fiddled with a hole in his jeans, unable to fully meet her eyes. "Like flowers and candy and cards and stuff. Lots of hearts. So I thought I'd do something special for you. Like a surprise."

She wrapped her arms around him in a quick hug. "Thank you. I love them." Then her face fell. "I didn't get anything for you."

"That's okay." He reached for her hand. "Your present to me is being here."

"Really?"

He smiled. "Really."

"What else do people do on Valentine's Day?"

He bit his lower lip before speaking. "Well, they usually go out on a date. Maybe to dinner or something. At least, that's what my parents used to do, when I was little." There was sadness in his tone when he spoke of them, and El didn't pry. Not now. "I thought maybe if we couldn't go out, we could have a picnic here, indoors."

"I haven't had breakfast yet," she said.

He smiled. "Breakfast picnic it is, then."

He got up, and El made a motion to follow him, and he shook his head. "You stay here. I'm making breakfast for you."

“With my stove,” Hop pointed out brusquely.

“Yeah.”

A short while later, they were both sitting cross legged on the floor, blanket spread beneath them, plates of bacon, and eggs, and eggos before them. Between them was the bouquet of roses, in a small glass vase Hopper had found.

Mike couldn't help but stare at her a little; she was so beautiful. Her hair was growing out a bit, curling past her ears, almost at her shoulders. She hadn't gotten much taller, but he could see the beginnings of curves, her chest straining across a dress that was a smidge too small and--damn it, Wheeler, stop staring at her chest--the delicacy that came with being underweight beginning to fill out, sharp bones disappearing into rounded flesh.

El pushed aside her plate and leaned over, squeezing his hand.

“Mike?”

Her voice pulled him out of his daze. “Yeah?”

“Thank you. And Happy Valentine's Day.”

He couldn't help but kiss her in that moment, not caring that Hop was staring daggers at him, clearing his throat loudly so they would break apart. Mike brushed aside one of her stray curls that had escaped from her barrette.

“Happy Valentine's Day, El.”

## 6. Pesach

### Summary for the Chapter:

Apologies were not El's forte.

### Notes for the Chapter:

I meant to get this chapter out sooner than now, but life happened. A lot. Basically, I have this headcanon that Max is half-Jewish on her dad's side, and still practices because of him, so I wanted to write this little bit about Passover, and have the reflective side of it because now we're counting the Omer (I am Jewish so I'll admit my bias in this). I really like the idea of El and Max having a friendship, but I know it doesn't come easily to them at first.

El lived for the weekends when the Party could visit, spending the day playing board games, watching movies, and the few nights she was included in their DnD campaigns. Hop didn't like the young teens traipsing through the woods, always paranoid that they'd be seen, that they'd be caught. But it meant the world to her, the excitement building in her chest, tingling at the bottom of the feet. She loved each one of them (okay, maybe not Max) and she couldn't wait to hear Dustin's stories, see Will's drawings, hear Lucas complain about his sister. And Mike. She always wanted to see Mike. She visited him in the Void, but to feel the pressure of his hand in hers, to lean in and catch the scent of his soap, was better than anything. Sneaking a kiss here and there. Nobody, and nothing, could tear them apart.

As spring warmed the frost on the ground the Party spent more time outside, and after one morning of running through the woods they piled into the kitchen, making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. El handed the loaf of Wonder bread to Max, who shook her head.

"No thanks," she said, and pulled out a plastic bag from her backpack, that looked like a PB and J, except it was made on white, flat crackers instead of bread.

“Dude, why are you eating a cracker sandwich?” Dustin asked.

“It’s matzah,” she explained.

“What?” Dustin blinked.

“It’s a Jewish thing, you idiot,” Lucas cut in. “At least, I think it is.”

“Yeah, it’s a Jewish thing,” Max answered.

“Max is Jewish?!” Dustin looked completely shocked.

Lucas rolled his eyes. “Yeah, dumbass, where you’ve been?”

“I dunno,” Dustin said, between a mouthful of sandwich.

“Thanks for the back-up, Stalker, but I don’t need it,” Max replied.

“Yeah, Dustin, it’s Passover. Can’t eat bread.”

“Dude, that sucks,” Dustin replied, shoving the other half of his sandwich into his mouth, tongue sticky with peanut butter.

Max shrugged her shoulders. “It’s whatever. Let’s just get back outside.”

As the Party finished their lunch, Max hung back, lingering by the porch. El glanced over at her. There was no love lost between the girls, not with Max’s patience wearing thin at trying to be kind, and El brushing her off. Every time El saw the redhead, she thought of the way she had smiled at Mike, the way they had joked in the gym, her skating around him. The bitterness still hung in the back of her throat, the longing and fear she had felt, the loneliness. Somehow, they were all knotted in the bottom of El’s stomach, and tied to her image of Max.

But, El had become good at observing people. She had to be. It was what had kept her safe over the years, along with her powers. Building. Waiting. Watching. And she could tell that there was unease in Max, a feeling that El didn’t have a word for, but she knew. A sense of being different.

El sat on the edge of the sagging porch, rolling up the sleeves of her

flannel shirt. “Max?” She asked, not really sure how to say what was in her heart.

“What?” The other girl snapped. The rest of the Party had taken off.

“Are you...” Words still felt clumsy to El, filled with implication and meaning and intention. “Okay?” She finished lamely, frustrating swelling in her chest. That wasn’t the right word, and she knew it.

“I don’t see why you care,” Max said. She sat on the porch, but a fair distance from El.

Apologies weren’t El’s forte. The words didn’t seem to be enough, and there was always the chance the person wouldn’t forgive you anyway. It had taken her a long time to talk to Hop about the meltdown, about her running away. Forgiveness had not come naturally to either of them.

“I’m sorry,” she managed to say, and Max’s head snapped up, looking El in the eyes.

“What?”

“I’m sorry. For not...for not being nice to you.” El held out her hand. “Friends?”

After a long moment of hesitation, Max took her hand and shook it. “Friends.”

It wasn’t exactly what El had wanted or needed to say, but when Max finally smiled at her, it was enough.